



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to the Head of Center in Dushanbe, Alain Couanon

As delivered by Chargé d'Affaires Paul W. Jones
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
May 12, 2005

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The United States warmly welcomes the new Head of Center in Dushanbe, Alain Couanon, and expresses its appreciation for his comprehensive report on the activities of the Center.

Mr. Chairman, let me begin by saying, as we have on many occasions, that the United States believes strongly in the OSCE's holistic approach to security. No one dimension can be deemed to be more or less important than the others. With this in mind, we encourage Ambassador Couanon and his team to continue to develop and deepen the Center's activities in all three dimensions.

This includes building on existing programs that strengthen the role of women in society to permit their full participation in civil, economic and political aspects of national life.

We recognize the important contribution the Center's gender program is making toward improving awareness of women's rights and in building up the capacity of women's NGOs. In particular, we note the practical success of the Women's Resource Centers in providing direct legal services, counseling and skills training to women in local settings.

Stockpiles of small arms and light weapons represent a persistent threat both in terms of dangerous actors who may gain access to them and to vulnerable populations who live near them. The United States welcomes the fact that, in developing a project to facilitate the destruction of excess weapons and improve stockpile management, the Center is meeting a direct request by the Government of Tajikistan.

Mr. Chairman, the United States remains convinced of the fundamental link between security and a vibrant civil society in which institutions and individuals benefit from the free exchange of ideas. We take the view that far from being a source of instability, an independent press is a prerequisite to a healthy and stable society in which differing opinions are permitted to inform and educate society. Freedom of media and freedom of expression are also part of the bedrock commitments made by OSCE participating States.

We therefore remain very concerned by the continued suspension of independent media outlets in Tajikistan, including the closures in April of Ruzi Nav and Nerui Suhan, as well as the independent printing house, Jionhon. We urge the Tajik authorities to recognize the vital role which independent media play in a healthy democracy, and to work constructively with the Center and with the Representative on Freedom of the Media to ensure a free media environment.

Regarding the insistence by authorities that the Center inform the government in advance of meetings with NGOs, political party representatives and journalists, this requirement is not consistent with democratic norms concerning the open exchange of views in a free civil society. Allowing members of NGOs and other civil society organizations to have unhindered access to international organizations is another commitment OSCE participating States have freely undertaken.

If independent media are the oxygen by which a democracy breathes, free and fair elections constitute the very backbone on which it rests. The United States concurs both with ODIHR's findings of serious irregularities in the conduct of parliamentary elections held last February and with its prescriptions for remedying these shortcomings. We urge the government of Tajikistan to work proactively with ODIHR to implement these recommendations in the shortest possible timeframe.

We are concerned by what seems to be a developing pattern of official harassment and selective prosecution of opposition politicians in Tajikistan. This creates at least the appearance of a concerted effort to eliminate from contention potential candidates for the 2006 presidential election. We call on Tajikistan's police services and judicial authorities to maintain scrupulous objectivity and independence from the political process.

In conclusion, we would like to assure Ambassador Couanon and his team of our continued strong support in their efforts to assist the Government of Tajikistan in implementing OSCE principles and commitments.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.